

BOOK REVIEW

CHRIST AND THE MEDIA

By Malcolm Muggeridge

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A Review by
Alan Baker

...as a television performer, I see myself as a man playing a piano in a brothel, who includes 'Abide With Me' in his repertoire in the hope of thereby edifying both clients and inmates (p. 12)

With his ever-ready urbane wit, Malcolm Muggeridge, in his introduction to Christ and the Media, rationalizes his breezy polemic against the media in general and television in particular. He calls them agents of the Devil, seeking with their pernicious fantasies to divert men's minds from the true reality, which is Christ.

Muggeridge's wit, in fact, is the best thing in this entertaining performance (at last a media book which is fun to read!), a revised version of three lectures which the well-known English author, editor, journalist, TV star and Christian apologist delivered in 1976 in a London church. His thesis, that "The Media have...provided the Devil with perhaps the greatest opportunity accorded him since Adam and Eve were turned out of the Garden of Eden," is no doubt sincerely presented. (p. 15) His argument however is often over-generalized, unsupported and sometimes quite arbitrary in its spirited metaphysical leaps.

Unlike McLuhan, whom Muggeridge takes to task as an example of one of the "communicators who cannot communicate," Muggeridge writes a clear scintillating prose so that the book's ebullience survives its preachiness to emerge, as the English would say, as "a bloody good read." Even the BBC brass, who objected to "Malcolm's" sallies against the Corporation, had finally to express their pleasure (in a section reproducing a dialogue with the lecture audience) at the gadfly style and self-ironic satire of the former editor of Punch.

Much of Muggeridge's satire depends for its effect on the taking of extreme positions. In Lecture One: The Fourth Temptation, for example, he fantasizes the Devil, after failing three times to tempt Christ into giving up his "kingdom of love" for the "kingdom of power," having "another go" at it. The Devil would offer to turn Jesus into a "superstar" on the electronic media:

Would Jesus agree?...How could he possibly refuse what would enable him to reach a huge public, right across the Roman Empire, instead of the rag, tag and bobtail lot following him around in Galilee?...it should be stressed that

there would be no intrusion of unsuitable commercials; just a very reputable sponsor--say the highly-respected public relations consultancy, Lucifer Inc. (p. 41)

Of course, Jesus turned down the offer, being "concerned with truth and reality" rather than with "fantasy and images." Naturally he would refuse to employ a medium like television which, according to Muggeridge "by its nature doesn't lend itself to constructive purposes."

The opposition between the true reality of Christ's word and the delusive fantasy purveyed by television is at the heart of the argument here, but Muggeridge fudges a basic question Is there really something intrinsically evil in the nature of television? Can one really condemn the technology because it is used to promulgate such "anti-Christian" themes as violence, pornography and commercialism? In other words, to continue the fantasy, couldn't Christ have employed TV as a super-medium to spread his gospel? After all, as he readily admits, Muggeridge himself continues to preach Christianity in the media he so villifies.

In attempting to get Muggeridge to clarify this issue, a puzzled Sir Brian Young, Director-General of the Independent Broadcasting Authority remarked:

Malcolm began by telling us of the fourth temptation. But did a page drop out of his text? I believe that Christ in the temptations was working out how he should use his divine power to bring man to God...We know that he refused to turn stones into bread. But we know also that he did turn fives loaves into food for thousands. And it seemed to me that the question that needed answering was whether Christ would let electronics multiply and hasten the spreading of his unique message...Or would he think that distortion would be bound to turn his bread into stones? I heard no attempt to tackle the question. I heard only the surrounding jests. (p. 118)

Perhaps it is the tension between jest and jeremiad that really gives the book its flavour; when Muggeridge leaves off jesting and launches into epistemology I find him less than convincing.

In Lecture Three: Seeing through the Eye, for example, Muggeridge takes off from William Blake's aphorism about the dangers of seeing with the physical eye rather than perceiving through the spiritual eye. He declaims:

Has there ever been a more perfect instrument for seeing with rather than through the eye, than the camera? And as it has developed from bleary daguerrotypes to the latest video product, what a multitude of lies it has induced belief in, ranging between the crazy claims of advertising and the sophisticated practice of Orwell's Newspeak and Doublethink...To see through the eye is to grasp the significance of what is seen, to see it in relation to the totality of God's creation...the camera is mindless, an instrument for merely looking. As such, it is more and more taking over the media... (p. 62-63)

Here, Muggeridge, who has been pushing a McLuhan-like "medium is the

message" argument is surely in his talk of "lies," dealing principally with content. The fault lies with those "anti-Christ's" who devise the media messages. Muggeridge never really seems to get this clear and his talk about the properties of the camera only serves to compound the confusion. Is the camera "mindless", a kind of self-propelled monster, or is a human being behind it? On the prowl for news, what the camera wants is an exciting or dramatic scene which will hold viewers, thus bringing into play its own particular expertise.

Muggeridge follows this up with page after page of examples which show how human agents control what the camera shall record. He skims over the complex set of relationships existing between the camera as a mechanical image-maker and framer of reality without context and the camera-operator as controlling agent. The ambivalence about medium and message probably reflects the ambiguity of his own position as both critic and user of television. When questioned further, he admits:

I shouldn't say at all that the media are beyond God's reach, and cannot convey truth, but I would say that they are, by their nature, primarily dedicated to fantasy, and that their effect on people is to enclose them in fantasy... What I've tried to do in these lectures is to show that there is a gulf between reality, which for Christians is Christ, and the world of fantasy that the media project...of course, God can use all things, even television...(p. 90)

Also blurry is Muggeridge's distinction between what he feels is the intrinsic honesty of the printed word versus the inherent evil of "picture language." He says that "the printed word--which I hold in veneration--is not subject to the same centralized control as television." This seems odd coming from an admirer of Orwell whose character Winston, anti-hero of 1984, worked in a government department whose job it was to "rewrite" history for consumption by the brainwashed.

But these are carping criticisms. It would be more profitable to put Muggeridge in the same league with McLuhan, Whitman and other modern prophets who can blithely say "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself." On this note I will conclude with a Muggeridgian gem:

- Lecture Two: The Dead Sea Video Tapes, in which he imagines (an old fantasy reworked) the archaeologists of the future discovering "a whole lot of contemporary pablum--videotape and film...and other recordings of the diversions, interests and entertainments of our time..."

With amazement they would see:

the scene set for the greatest cultural explosion of history...And the result? Instead of sages, philosopher-kings and saints, pop-stars, psychiatrists and gurus. Looking for a Leonardi da Vinci or a Shakespeare, the archaeologists find only a Rolling Stone. (p. 53)